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SUBJECT: CODEL LANTOS VISITS PARLIAMENT, MEETS REFORMERS,  
AND DISCUSSES ISLAMIC AFFAIRS

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SUMMARY  
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1. (SBU) As part of his January 2-5 visit to Morocco, Congressman Lantos (D-CA) visited and toured the Moroccan Parliament, met with Moroccan reformers, and discussed recent political, social and religious reforms with the Minister of Islamic Affairs. Lantos was accompanied by his wife Annette Lantos; HIRC Democratic Staff Director Robert King, HIRC Senior Professional Staff Member Alan Makovsky, Professional Staff Member Mike Beard, and friends Philip Friedman, Rosa Friedman, and Jeffrey Friedman. Ambassador and Embassy staff also accompanied Congressman Lantos in his meetings. At Parliament, both sides hailed the close USG-GOM cooperation and expressed a desire for continued exchanges with counterparts. Moroccan reformers praised ongoing reforms, but delineated numerous challenges facing Morocco, including a low level of political participation, high unemployment and poverty rates, a continued high illiteracy rate especially in rural areas, and a lack of focus on the Amazigh (Berber) population. The Minister of Islamic Affairs described Morocco's unique experience at adapting Islamic religious values to modern political life and discussed the Ministry's efforts to use information technology to promote tolerant religious values. End summary.

Visit to Parliament  
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2. (SBU) On January 4, Congressman Thomas Lantos, accompanied by Ambassador and delegation, was received by First Vice President of the Lower House Driss Sentissi (Parliament President Abdulwahid Radi was on travel). Sentissi summarized Morocco's recent achievements, stressing that since 1999, parliament has been strengthened and increasingly consulted on key issues. He emphasized that, given the importance of the Free Trade Agreement with the U.S., MPs worked hard to pass the agreement as a means of reinforcing the bilateral relations between the two countries. Sentissi expressed his desire to strengthen relations between the U.S. Congress and the Moroccan Parliament and thanked the Ambassador for giving the opportunity to Moroccan MPs to exchange ideas with their American counterparts. Lantos reaffirmed the U.S. Congress' view that Morocco is a long-standing friend of America's and an important partner on many international issues. He added that "Morocco has consistently demonstrated a strong commitment to peace, stability, and constitutional democracy. As a tolerant, multi-racial and multi-ethnic Islamic society, Morocco continues to stand as a bulwark against the extremism prevalent in the region. Morocco is to be particularly commended for working to resolve the conflict in the Western Sahara through the efforts of the United Nations."

3. (SBU) Following a tour of the Parliamentary chamber, Lantos and delegation met with Foreign Affairs Committee President Khadija Belftough and Committee member Ahmed Zarouf. Belftough praised the historical Moroccan-American relations and stressed the important role that King Mohamed's vision, credibility, and commitment have played in advancing prospects for regional peace. Zarouf described Morocco's commitment to democracy and human rights as an example for the region, citing Morocco as the first country where an independent human rights entity (the Equity and Reconciliation Commission) has publicly disclosed past human rights violations. In the economic sphere, Morocco is committed to free trade, privatization, a free market economy and enhanced economic trade and investment with the U.S. as witnessed by the FTA. Zarouf said Morocco sought more investment and tourism from the US, and expressed concern about the level of corruption in Morocco. Lantos said that trade liberalization with Morocco will support the U.S. Administration's commitment to promote more tolerant, open, and prosperous Muslim societies. He explained that economic and political reforms underway in Morocco will certainly enhance the GOM's efforts to attract new trade and investment, and promote sustainable development. Praising Morocco for having chosen to work against extremism, Lantos said that countries such as "the United States, Morocco, Israel and others will stand against terrorism and promote

values of democracy, tolerance and coexistence."

14. (SBU) Noting that he had sat next to the Iraqi Ambassador at a dinner the previous evening hosted by Ambassador Riley, Lantos commented that Iraq had thrown off the terror of Saddam Hussein and was now consolidating itself as a free and open society. Lantos said the US was grateful for Moroccan assistance to help Iraq become a more stable, normal society. Zarouf commented that while there was some progress in Iraq, "many people have been killed" in the process, implying that the US bore some of the responsibility. Lantos vigorously rejected any equivalence between Saddam's "deliberate killing" and the accidental casualties caused by US forces. Zarouf also made a plea for the U.S. to help the world limit "state terrorism wherever it exists."

15. (SBU) On the Western Sahara, Zarouf commented that Morocco did not have the same propaganda machinery that Algeria deployed to defend its position on the issue. Zarouf said U.S. support on the Sahara was critical, noting that it was ridiculous to contemplate creating a nation of 100,000 people in one corner of the Sahara when the Saharan population numbered more than 4 million spread the width of Africa.

16. (SBU) Lantos and his delegation then met with five of the eight Parliamentary caucus leaders representing the eight committees in Parliament. Mr. Lantos described U.S. policy in support of UN efforts to resolve the Western Sahara issue. On behalf of the Caucus leaders, USFP Parliamentarian Driss Lachgar reiterated the Moroccan parliament's desire to continue working with all democratic forces around the globe to fight extremist views and promote values of freedom of expression and tolerance. In a reference to the Western Sahara, Lachgar also described the ongoing threat of terrorist networks in the Sahel and asked for USG assistance to help the Maghreb countries overcome their differences to better confront terrorist networks in the Sahel. Lachgar praised the U.S. embassy for reaching out to Parliament, for helping Morocco reduce poverty, and for supporting Morocco's transition to democracy.

#### Meeting with Moroccan Reformers

17. (SBU) During a January 4 tea hosted by Ambassador for Moroccan reformers including Istiqlal Party executive committee member Nizar Baraka, NGO founder and former parliamentarian Ali Belhaj, and president of the Amazigh (Berber) Association Tamaynout Hassan Eid Belkacem, the participants told Lantos that the reforms being undertaken in Morocco were principally associated with its democratic transition. Both Belhaj and Baraka agreed that the most recent municipal and legislative elections demonstrated fairness and transparency and represented an important step in Morocco's democratization process. Baraka said that the newly adopted political party bill was also critical for restructuring political parties. Belhaj noted that Morocco devoted important efforts to human rights issues and that, despite existing shortcomings, press freedom had also improved over the past five years.

18. (SBU) Nonetheless, Morocco still faces many challenges, according to Baraka, including a low rate of political participation (35% in cities and less in rural areas) and a poverty rate of 14% in the cities and 40% in the rural areas. Youth unemployment is another major issue as the number of youth ready for employment is soaring and the current growth rate is too low (4 percent) to absorb demand. Belhaj explained that Morocco is the only country in the world where unemployment for graduates is higher than that of the uneducated population which results in a brain drain. Other major challenges include the high rate of illiteracy and low school attendance as eighty percent of rural women are illiterate and two million children do not attend school, despite the fact that 25% of the public budget is allocated to education. Recent polls have shown that Moroccan youth prefer to emigrate if given the choice. Illiterate and unskilled youth opt for illegal emigration whereas the skilled workforce chooses to migrate to Europe or Canada. This demonstrates the failure of the education system in preparing its youth for the labor market, commented Belhaj.

19. (SBU) Morocco is facing these challenges by working to speed up the economic transition through improving the judicial and administrative system, according to Baraka. There is also an urgent need for Morocco to open its market to the Maghreb as a recent World Bank study indicated that opening the border with Algeria could increase the Moroccan GDP by two percentage points. However, with the current high price of oil, any negotiations with Algeria now on the Western Sahara issue will put Morocco at a disadvantage.

110. (SBU) Eid Belkacem raised his concern that while the Berber population is the largest ethnic group in Morocco, its language is not acknowledged as an official language in the constitution. While he agreed that progress had been made under King Mohamed VI in human rights, women's rights and the recognition of the Amazigh (Berber) language, he

said that the system is too centralized, which makes implementation of reforms difficult. While the recent census may indicate that approximately 27 percent of the population speaks Berber, Eid Belkacem said that he would estimate that Berbers make up 40-50 percent of the population. Being Berber in Morocco is not like being an American Indian since Berber is still a living language and culture and, in some areas, it is the only spoken language. The fact that Arabic is the primary language taught in schools is one of the main reasons for a low retention rate in schools in rural Berber populated areas, according to Belhaj.

11. (SBU) Belhaj said that Morocco's problems are primarily related to the lack of separation of powers and to the still-weak parliament. The fact that the Prime Minister is not a politician, but a technocrat is also an issue, and can serve to discourage political participation.

12. (SBU) Lantos responded that the legislative branch is oftentimes weak in emerging democracies. He noted that two Congressmen had established a program to share the U.S. experience and assist emerging parliamentary bodies and offered to follow up on the possibility of including Morocco in this program. Lantos said that because PM Jettou does not represent a political party, he has the advantage of not having to respond to specific political pressures. When asked by Lantos what they would do if they were PM, Belhaj opted to strengthen the separation of powers, Baraka said that he would attempt to give political life more credibility, and Eid Belkacem favored a democratic constitution that would guarantee human dignity and the right to equal distribution of resources.

#### Minister of Islamic Affairs

13. (SBU) In a January 4 meeting, Minister of Islamic Affairs Ahmed Toufiq expressed his appreciation for Congressman Lantos' visit, noting that it demonstrates the interest shown by the U.S. in his Ministry's reform efforts. When Toufiq meets with the ulemas (religious scholars), he will tell them of the Lantos visit to emphasize this interest to them. The Minister then described Morocco's unique experience of attempting to integrate Islam's values into the requirements of modern life, including democracy. As such, Morocco could serve as a role model for the rest of the world. (Embassy Note: Morocco and Kuwait signed an MOU in late December aimed at promoting moderate Islam through IT and the media. End Note). Through his Ministry, Morocco is now working to use information technology - through the establishment of a website, a new TV station inaugurated by the King, and in the near future, an online network linking 1000 mosques which will allow imams to interact real-time with each other and with the Ministry to receive religious guidance and assistance. Of utmost importance is that a distinction be made between Islam's true values and the desecration that has been done in the name of Islam, according to Toufiq.

14. (SBU) Lantos described how, as the U.S. enters the new millennium, Americans are increasingly conscious of the importance the Islamic faith plays in the world. Islam is now the fastest growing religion in the U.S. Lantos noted that Morocco has been a leader for generations in religious tolerance and moderation, and, as a result, has a unique role to play in the Islamic world. At a time when Islam is being subverted by a minority, the U.S. looks to its friends in Morocco and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs to teach the followers of Islam the true meaning of the faith. A commitment to tolerance and moderation is now more important than ever. Lantos wished the Ministry the best of luck in its reform efforts. The Ambassador also expressed his appreciation for the important work being done by the Ministry.

15. (SBU) Codel Lantos did not have the opportunity to clear this cable.

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